



Environment Committee
Public Hearing of February 25, 2022

Senate Bill No. 117 (Raised) - AN ACT CONCERNING TREE REMOVAL ON PROPERTIES UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the **National Audubon Society** through its affiliate state office, Audubon Connecticut. My name is Robert LaFrance and I am Audubon Connecticut's Director of Policy.

Audubon Connecticut protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow, using science, bipartisan issue advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. Our conservation network extends statewide and includes nearly 32,000 members, five Connecticut chapters, and many partners along the Atlantic Flyway. Audubon's policy work is grounded in—and informed by—science. At Audubon, our core values demand that our work advance justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Senate Bill No. 117 (Raised) - AN ACT CONCERNING TREE REMOVAL ON PROPERTIES UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION:

We understand that Senate Bill No. 117 was raised in response to tree removal actions by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) at Housatonic Meadows State Park. DEEP did not contact any of its conservation partners before certain iconic riverside trees were removed. Yet, to DEEP's credit, they acknowledge the issue. According to DEEP's written testimony on Senate Bill No. 117:

... DEEP's approach to hazard tree removal has not historically involved public notification in advance of a project, and it has not involved the use of certified arborists in confirming the determination that a tree constitutes a hazard.

As a result of recent events and public input received related to a hazard tree removal project at Housatonic Meadows State Park, DEEP is implementing initial steps to provide more public notice ahead of hazard tree removal projects. DEEP is also actively working on further enhancements to the Department's hazard tree removal process that promote public safety and access to parks and campgrounds, provide for greater transparency, public notice, and natural resource conservation, while being capable of being implemented in a timely and effective way within the Department's available resources. DEEP is giving particular consideration to the feasibility of utilizing arborists

or enhanced skills in hazard tree assessment in areas or circumstances that are significant or sensitive. Connecticut's arborist training and certification requirements are robust and are currently not included in the job description for either a park supervisor or maintainer.

We believe that DEEP's current staffing levels are woefully inadequate across all bureaus, but this is especially true for the Branch of Environment Conservation (EC) which includes the bureaus of Outdoor Recreation and Natural Resources. DEEP's EC Branch is facing a reduction in staff to retirements and to an increase in on the ground responsibilities due to a change in the park admission pricing model change through the Passport to Parks Program. Also, more visitors are going to all outdoor spaces as a result of the COVID 19 Pandemic. (See CT DEEP 2022 STAFFING REPORT Required by Special Act 21-23 dated FEBRUARY 9th, 2022 – Attached).

At Audubon, we have had a successful partnership with the Division of Forestry for many years. Forest management plans include a public outreach and access to state forestry officials. And, we have worked with the Division of Forestry on the [Forests for Birds](#) program. We believe the focus of Senate Bill No. 117 on appointing "an arborist for each state park and campground under the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's custody and control" is the correct priority. Yet, in order for this necessary level of management and improved transparency to take place additional human resources must be provided.

Moving forward, we wish to associate our testimony with the recommendations of the [Connecticut Forest and Park Association](#) and the [Connecticut Land Conservation Council](#). We agree with the notion that "...the hazard tree assessment process should be interdisciplinary, [and] made by or under the direct guidance of a licensed arborist and other professionals with relevant expertise. It should also include an evaluation of options to mitigate potential hazards and preserve the trees."

Finally, Audubon Connecticut is participating in the Housatonic Meadows State Park Working Group and we hope we can everyone can work together to improve how we manage our state parks and campgrounds.

In closing, the National Audubon Society relies upon the enormous generosity of our members and donors to keep our mission going. As a 501(c) not for profit entity the National Audubon Society manages many properties in Connecticut. We make these properties available to the public so that both residents and visitors alike can enjoy birds and an open space experience. These are Connecticut eco-tourism experiences where we provide natural resource and conservation education. The link below provides additional information about our centers, sanctuaries, properties and programs. <http://ct.audubon.org/about-us/centers-sanctuaries-and-chapters>

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this proposal. Should you have any questions, please contact Robert LaFrance, Director of Policy, Audubon Connecticut, National Audubon Society, at Robert.LaFrance@Audubon.org (Cell 203.668.6685)